

The Trouble with Wellness

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This essay reviews three recent books that interrogate the shortcomings of American wellness as an individualistic feature of late-capitalist lifestyle consumerism and an often-misinformed exercise in health-seeking. Kerri Kelly's *American Detox: The Myth of Wellness and How We Can Truly Heal* (2022), Christy Harrison's *The Wellness Trap: Break Free from Diet Culture, Disinformation, and Dubious Diagnoses – and Find Your True Well-Being* (2023), and Derek Beres, Matthew Remski, and Julian Walker's *Conspirituality: How New Age Conspiracy Theories Became a Health Threat* (2023) are scholarly works written for a popular audience. The authors draw largely on medical journals, news outlets, interviews, and secondary historical sources that capture our current *zeitgeist* of health-related anxiety, frustration, and fear that existed prior to, but was deeply exacerbated by, the COVID-19 pandemic. I analyze these books together because they thematically overlap while approaching wellness from three distinctive, and consecutive, analytical angles. Kelly's *American Detox* is concerned with wellness's white privilege and obfuscation of social injustice; Harrison's *The Wellness Trap* is primarily focused on the gendered nature of wellness pursuits and their deleterious effects on body image; Beres, Remski, and Walker's *Conspirituality* warns that wellness is inherently cultish and lures practitioners into distrustful worldviews that are dangerous to both the body and the body politic. All of the works under review deploy the methodologies of social media analysis, ethnography, and personal memoir.

The books are well-written, absorbing, and provocative, but the authors' zeal in criticizing wellness overlooks a more nuanced history in which wellness can offer an important alternative health modality for those who are both suffering and excluded from modern medicine. Indeed, *Race and Yoga* has offered examples of how marginalized groups can use yoga as a wellness modality to offset personal health crises (Ternikar 2021; Wells 2017). While not explicitly acknowledged, all three works are informed by a dominant wellness discourse that emphasizes the individual over the collective good and presumes the robust economic and physical health of those who are attracted to wellness pursuits. While this discourse inspires the authors' criticism, it also elides how wellness might help those whose well-being is, in fact, in jeopardy (Derkatch 2018; Elraz and McCabe 2023). Although the authors wrestle with what wellness means, they miss the crucial irony that so many wellness seekers are already healthy. Rhetoric scholar Colleen Derkatch sums up this discursive snag beautifully in writing that wellness discourse is predicated on the entanglement of seemingly opposed logics of restoration and enhancement: those who seek wellness through dietary supplements and natural health products seek simultaneously to restore their bodies, perceived as malfunctioning, to prior states of ideal health and well-being, *and* to enhance their bodies by optimizing bodily processes ... The fusing of these two logics creates an essentially closed rhetorical system in which wellness is always a moving target (2018, 132).

I would add that this dominant wellness discourse privileges the healthy body as a profitable site for endless improvement while the unhealthy body is excluded from wellness at the very moment it most needs help to heal.

All three books are, to varying degrees, engaged with contemporary American yoga. As I discuss below, both the wellness economy and the wellness literature dovetail with yoga as a spiritual practice and a cultural commodity. Kelly, Beres, Remski, and Walker are either current or former practitioners whose yogic experiences deeply inform their criticism of wellness. Kelly views yoga as helpful for social activism while Beres, Remski, and Walker treat yoga with suspicion, uneasy about its rituals, complex history, and commodification. Harrison more loosely connects yoga to the broader industry of wellness products and services that generate over a billion dollars a year in the United States and continues to grow.¹ The trouble with wellness is how seamlessly it has been incorporated into the neoliberal promise of endless economic growth at the expense of people, the environment, and, indeed, health. It is this essential paradox that has produced a litany of wellness criticism, the subject of this essay. To situate these books within a genealogy of American wellness, I first delineate the history and politics surrounding the concept, tracking it into the contemporary COVID-19 context.

Historicizing Wellness

“Wellness” entered the American lexicon when Halpert L. Dunn, MD published “What High-Level Wellness Means” in the November 1959 issue of the *Canadian Journal of Public Health*. A biostatistician from the Midwest, Dunn worked for the Mayo Clinic before moving into public health. His expertise in quantifying health clearly left him with questions about what qualified it, and his essay postulated some answers. Wellness did not mean optimum health so much as “a direction in progress toward an ever-higher potential of functioning” (447). Included in Dunn’s theory of high-level wellness were the concepts of “an open-ended and ever-expanding tomorrow” and “the integration of the whole being of the total individual – his body, mind, and spirit – in the functioning process” (447). Herein are echoes of humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow’s theory of self-actualization and the hierarchy of needs, which reshaped American therapeutic practice and generated the Human Potential Movement, the touchstone of 1960s soul-seekers pursuing transcendental experience (Maslow 1954; 1962).

Embedded in Dunn’s theory was an optimism about human goodness emerging from the economic and cultural opportunities of the post-war era as the United States solidified its place as the world’s preeminent economic and military power. Dunn’s vision of holistic experience pushed past the fears of the Cold War and the traumas of the Great Depression and World War II to suggest that if an individual could reach their highest potential today, they could help shape a better America of tomorrow. As New Age-y as these ideas were, they also reaffirmed liberal concepts of individualism, economic growth, and self-fulfillment. While alternative health practices already had a long history in the United States, dating back to late nineteenth century Progressive concerns about the social and physical effects of urbanization, industrialization, and the loss of nature, “wellness” was a distinctly mid-century modern – even utopian – expression of faith in the future built on reaching one’s highest potential today (Schrunk 2019). The religious resonance is not accidental as many of wellness’s key tenets can be found in nineteenth-century Transcendentalism and the teachings of Theosophy, both of which shaped the foundations of New Age and yoga philosophy in the United States.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth-century critics of what we now call “wellness” were primarily white male medical professionals who feared competition for patients, the inclusion of women medical practitioners, and quackery, which was a genuine concern but also one that reflected anxiety about any challenge to the dominance of Western medicine. Along with the legitimate fear that Americans could be poisoned by snake oil was an often-xenophobic reaction to non-white medical practices, such as those of the Chinese who imported herbal remedies and acupuncture when they were segregated into California’s Chinatowns. At precisely the same time that nativists pushed for the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the American Medical Association sounded alarms about Chinese medicine, reflecting less of a concern that it didn’t work, but that it *did* and thus threatened the exclusive domain of American doctors (Widney 1888). Also in 1882, indigenous medicine was delegitimated by federal law when the Commission of Indian Affairs discouraged the “heathenish” rituals of traditional Native American healers (Haas 1949; Pacheco et al. 2013, 2152-2159). Wellness, with its radical diets, potions, and esoteric non-white lineages, was seen as a threat to both the professional status and profitability of mainstream American medicine. This led to a thicket of baroque licensing laws, certifications, and other legal restrictions, the legacy of which still haunts wellness practitioners to this day, especially those who operate outside the corporate wellness industry.

Regulatory tensions between Western medicine and alternative health practices in the United States never really ebbed, but wellness began to move slowly into the mainstream as yoga and meditation began to be seen as a means to ease middle-class anxiety (Petrzela 2022, 100-108). By the end of the twentieth century, wellness had become big business with yoga leading the way into a new future of profitable activities and products that proffered a path to spiritual enlightenment and physical fitness. About fifteen years ago, scholars and journalists began producing books critical of the new yoga industrial complex, in part because of its cultural appropriations and, in part, because prominent gurus kept getting indicted for sexual and financial impropriety. John Philp’s 2009 *Yoga, Inc.: A Journey Through the Big Business of Yoga* was one of the first to critique Bikram and YogaWorks for exploitative business practices and sexual misconduct.

Criticism of what was happening to yoga increasingly merged with criticism of wellness, highlighting a growing concern that wellness – now its own industry – preyed on women’s insecurities about their bodies, lent itself to disordered eating, was racist and exclusionary, and served as the perfect neoliberal tool through which workers could be underpaid yet offered free mindfulness classes to offset their stress and increase their efficiency (Burton 2020; Caulfield 2015; Cederström and Spicer 2015; Ehrenreich 2018; Purser 2019; Raphael 2022; Sole-Smith 2018). While the criticism grew louder, the wellness economy only grew bigger – and then, in March 2020, COVID-19 stopped us in our tracks. Overnight, yoga studios and wellness centers closed, and public health became the foremost global political issue. What happened next changed all our lives in myriad ways, but it had unforeseen consequences for wellness as an industry and as a state-of-mind.

Contemporary Wellness Literature

Kerri Kelly’s *American Detox: The Myth of Wellness and How We Can Truly Heal* argues that contemporary wellness culture produces a “well-being gap” she defines as a “disparity driven not by personal choice but by proximity to power and privilege” (Kelly 2022, 3). In Kelly’s view, wellness is a consumer activity that relies on wealth and self-interest,

distracting participants from the social and economic injustice that disproportionately affects the poor but ultimately depletes us all. She writes,

Wellness is not making us well. It is making us worse. While wellness promises enlightenment, the circumstances of our lived reality tell a different story. The many crises we are facing are exponential – from infectious disease to racial injustice, to extreme income inequality, to accelerating climate change. And while wellness exploits our fears and vulnerabilities, it does nothing to address the systems that got us here in the first place (3).

In Kelly's formulation, the wellness industry is indistinguishable from the system of private healthcare that profits from our illness. Moreover, this health-and-wellness system functions as a finger-wagging moral policeman while simultaneously shoving us all into the matrices of "normal" bodies (51). Even if "normal" is broadly defined, those that fall outside of it are not simply "unwell," but have failed "to live up to society's unrealistic expectations" of what a proper, healthy body is (47). This is one of Kelly's most important critiques of American wellness: it is fundamentally ableist in that it excludes disabled bodies through patterns of access and convenience unavailable to those with significant physical limitations. Unless a yoga class is specifically geared toward disabled practitioners – and those are rare outside a therapeutic or rehabilitative modality – it is unusual to see a yogi in a wheelchair, for example. Kelly's point is that wellness's – indeed, yoga's – promise of liberation rings hollow when the starting line for enlightened health-seeking is a high-performing normative body.

COVID-19 affected Kelly's perspective on embodiment as she bore witness to the excruciating inequalities the virus laid bare. Like many middle class Americans, she could work from home and order supplies online while delivery drivers and grocery store workers worked long hours and encountered an unmasked public every day. Indeed, she makes the excellent point that the isolating experience of social distancing and quarantine, unheard of for most Americans prior to COVID-19, was a regular feature of quotidian life for "undocumented, disabled, and elderly folks" (75-76). The pandemic also highlighted racial inequality as the virus disproportionately killed people of color who had experienced a lifetime of limited access to medical care.

Kelly's project to poke holes in wellness's sanctimony and show the racist and economic inequalities behind it, such as the exploited Global South workers who sew our yoga clothes, successfully disrupts the idea that our wellness pursuits are anything but individualist and selfish. Moreover, she clearly demonstrates that they are also insidious as a large part of the wellness credo rests on the tenuous assumption that we are making the world a better place, somehow, through status-seeking lifestyle consumerism. Kelly's conclusions, however, claim that identity politics will push us through wellness's contradictions. She rightly argues that wellness's white privilege intensifies social inequality and obscures the racialized cultural appropriation from which much of American wellness is derived. But I am unsure how "detoxing from whiteness" (179) can help as fretting over the privilege of juice cleanses and expensive yoga classes will not meaningfully challenge systemic racial or economic inequality. Kelly's frustration is that wellness offers a guilt-free salve for inequalities that I believe only a complete restructuring of our economic system can actually fix. Wellness, in this model of material change, ends up being beside the point because the real problem distressing Kelly is not yoga or green smoothies, but capitalism. As an extraordinarily efficient engine of globalized neoliberalism, wellness is a symptom of late capitalist excess, not a stable platform upon which to build the social justice movement Kelly wishes to see emerge.

Whereas Kerri Kelly's *American Detox* focuses on the racial and economic inequalities revealed by wellness's pursuit of perfection, Christy Harrison's *The Wellness Trap* is more concerned with its pernicious overlap with diet culture and the misinformation about weight loss, food, and health in general that wellness proponents circulate through American media and online platforms. Harrison defines wellness as the things one does or buys to access optimum health while wellness *culture* is "a set of values that equates wellness with moral goodness and posits certain behaviors – and a certain type of body – as a path to achieving that supposed rectitude" (6). She is self-conscious about the fact that many wellness practitioners are suspicious of naysayers as "shills for 'Big Pharma' and/or 'Big Food'" (13). Harrison is thus clear that her goal is not to discount wellness and the healing it can offer, but to share her skepticism about its effects on our diets and eating patterns that she fears can lead to a disordered relationship with food. The "trap" is a pursuit of wellness and body idealism that leaves health-seekers physically, mentally, and economically worse off than they started.

The marriage between wellness and alternative eating began in the 1970s as a reaction to the large-scale food production; the original "green revolution" is still celebrated as one of the industrial victories of the post-World War II era. Ironically, in Halpert Dunn's original formulation of high-level wellness, he promoted "the role of science in creating an abundant food supply, and he points to the agricultural revolution and food industrialization as having contributed to greater longevity" (Harrison 2023, 20). The counterculture may have adopted Dunn's theory of optimum human potential, but it dismissed the highly-processed convenience food of the 1950s in favor of organic crops, plant-based food, and co-operatives that could bring fresh harvests to the people. The diet industry, already emerging as an important business sector in the 1970s, seized on the concepts of "clean," unprocessed eating and high-level wellness as ways to repackage restrictive weight-loss regimens as enlightened pursuits (24). Harrison argues that "there's a symbiotic relationship between the two: from the 1970s forward, wellness has incorporated diet culture's tenets as its own, while diet culture uses 'wellness' as justification for its existence and a cloak to cover its problematic past. That symbiosis is still thriving today, in ways that have caused tremendous damage to people's relationship with food and their bodies" (25). Virginia Sole-Smith, an outspoken critic of wellness's focus on thinness, has noted that this symbiosis is also present in the "intersection of the alternative food movement and the war on obesity," which helps explain the sharp uptick in the wellness economy in the early 2000s when "healthy eating" became a state mandate as well as a moral imperative (Herndon 2014; Sole-Smith 2018, xi).

Meanwhile, wellness also intersects with beauty culture, an age-old patriarchal strategy to keep women distracted from more meaningful goals and competing with one another for the favors of the powerful. In the matrix of wellness, beauty products are sold as "clean" products that will ameliorate one's life from the inside out. Harrison makes the excellent point that the effectiveness of any of these products becomes irrelevant in our era of Instagrammable marketing that highlights form over function. Véronique Hyland, a fashion features director for *Elle* magazine, excoriates the "clean" beauty trend by pointing out the ubiquity and weirdly flat pinkness of commodities that promote a retrograde brand of femininity, an "ambivalent girliness," that intersects with a "softer" side of feminism (Hyland 2022, 4). Harrison argues that this pastel palette combined with the language of "clean eating" produces a seductive "wellness aesthetic ... [that] is all soft colors, daylight, houseplants, and calculated whimsy within a structure of cleanliness, orderliness. It's a free space we wish we had in our minds, a visual antidote to the emotional chaos of modern life" (Harrison 2023, 54).

While dangerous diets and impossible beauty standards are Harrison's initial emphases, internet misinformation – and its role in reinforcing wellness's pervasive sway – is the focus of the remainder of *The Wellness Trap*. As many of us were, Harrison, too, was startled by the haste with which COVID-19 altered daily life and unveiled previously surreptitious sources of terrible health advice. Part of the story is that everyone spent more time online and made themselves vulnerable to a key feature of surveillance capitalism: the orientation of users toward specific websites and advertising that algorithms calculate will lead us to more “likes” and purchases. The effect is an information bubble in which much of what we read online reinforces ideas we already hold – or are susceptible to believing – without a lot of critical thought.

The other part of the story is how the pandemic's emergence as an amorphous and frightening global health crisis fed wellness-seeking like nothing else prior. If one was already predisposed to inordinate explorations of the online wellness world, the pandemic offered an opportunity where one had both the time to do it and the justification that health was the pressing news item of the day. Harrison argues that between the predisposition toward distrusting health authorities and “a tendency to rely more heavily on intuition than on analytical thinking,” COVID-19 produced a veritable laboratory of conspiracy theories and misinformation that grew exponentially as the pandemic continued (129).

Picking up where Harrison leaves off, Derek Beres, Matthew Remski, and Julian Walker's *Conspirituality: How New Age Conspiracy Theories Became a Health Threat* investigates why COVID-19 tripped off paranoia among wellness practitioners in such a pronounced way as to affect vaccination campaigns and influence elections. Like Harrison, Beres, Remski, and Walker place most of the blame on social media platforms that emboldened users to spread unverified health information as fact. This began before the pandemic but the specific context of COVID-19 increased the spread as flawed information from medical experts “gave everyone who was already on the edge of institutional distrust a boost of validation, and a broader demographic to engage” (Beres, Remski, and Walker 2023, 7). But concerns about political malfeasance and public health moved well beyond misgivings about federal policy to something else. They write,

The paranoia had a Goop-y glow. The pandemic had inflamed an obsession with health. Not the public type of health – now caricatured by tedious messages about social distancing and masks – but an impassioned, moralizing fetish for personal health that is preoccupied with low body fat, supplements, positive thinking, sugar elimination, and focus on the soul (7-8).

Beres, Remski, and Walker reveal a personal trauma they each experienced in the wellness world that left them deeply skeptical of its healing potential, which inspired them to create *Conspirituality*, a podcast that predates the book. They spare no New Age sacred cow lambasting, among others, the multilevel marketing scam behind the essential oil company, doTerra; the spurious health theories of Christiane Northrup, MD; the far-right sympathies of life coach-turned comedian, J.P. Sears; and the magical thinking of *The Secret*. But they save their true ire for yoga, which *Conspirituality* depicts as controlling, exploitative, and fraudulent. They also argue that yoga's discipline, purification rituals, and historical connections to nineteenth century body-building have unsavory political implications, “As the twentieth century ground on, [the] Euro-Indian fascist link would strengthen, with some Indian nationalists openly admiring the pride and organizational discipline of European fascist movements – especially the Germans, who were beginning to saber-rattle at a shared enemy: the British” (72). The authors further this provocative claim – and explain how this history was obscured – by arguing that “the

postwar marketing of yoga was driven by Indian charismatic entrepreneurs who saw themselves as creating a universal wellness product that would not sell if it were complicated by the politics that the world had just barely survived” (77).

While suggesting that the philosophical foundations of modern yoga are more malevolent than we might want to believe, *Conspirituality* also claims that the ubiquitous trainings that churn out new yoga teachers are shaky at best. The authors blame the unregulated credentialing system that grants yoga teacher certificates for hawking expensive curricula that teach a cognitive mush of metaphysics, enlightenment, and pseudoscience. Yoga teacher-trainings – and the schools and gurus they support – are held up in *Conspirituality* as a symptom of three major weaknesses in American yoga: 1) economic instability; 2) immoral behavior; and 3) vulnerability to misinformation (131-132). With the historical, intellectual, and organizational scaffolding already rickety, *Conspirituality* argues that COVID-19 dealt yoga a death blow. They write, For good or ill, the internet exploded at just the right moment to allow brands and teachers to promote themselves in new ways. When COVID shuttered the studios in the spring of 2020, the internet became a claustrophobic lifeline for a culture that was always demanding a new world but was never equipped with the analytical, political, or cultural tools to create one (132).

While I do not share the authors’ fear that yoga is a conduit to QAnon, I empathize with their frustration – also articulated by Kerri Kelly in *American Detox* – as to why we keep hoping wellness will fix us despite copious evidence to the contrary.

Conclusion

The answer, perhaps, is that Americans are desperate for accurate health information, making them susceptible to the offerings of the wellness industry that the books under review argue is a perilous path. Nevertheless, I would argue that wellness is salvageable if we distinguish between three different types. First, *wellness*[®] is exemplified by Gwyneth Paltrow, her company, Goop, and the pursuit of expensive commodities that signal wealth and conspicuous consumption under the guise of health-seeking. Second, “*wellness*” falls more in line with Halpert Dunn’s theory of optimum functionality whereby morning meditation rituals, yoga classes, the occasional juice fast, and purging clutter from one’s living space signify the perks of middle class lifestyle consumerism but also help people feel in control of life’s chaos. In these two examples, wellness is a privilege of the healthy.

But the third, *wellness*, minus any qualifying punctuation marks, is something else that falls outside of the dominant wellness discourse. There are people for whom Western medicine has failed, either through lack of access or dangerous medical intrusions, that has left them traumatized and sick. American medical schools are notorious for discounting nutrition so that simple dietary hacks that could solve a patient’s chronic intestinal pain are overlooked until something goes catastrophically wrong. Gynecological health is widely misunderstood leaving women in pain, hormonally unsteady, and given few options other than “riding it out” or “cutting it out.” When confronted with these types of health challenges, whether they have insurance or not, people seek out alternatives. If they are scrupulous about the information they imbibe – and if they are lucky – they *can* find relief from intense suffering without huge capital outlays or suspended disbelief. I am grateful for this new critical literature but cautious that dismissing wellness as a “myth,” a “trap,” or a “conspiracy” overlooks what is a complex system of communication and care that, at its best, can offset misery. Given, too, that the origins of

wellness criticism can be found in the patriarchal and racialized hierarchy of the early American medical establishment, we need to detox from corporate wellness while recognizing the empowering potential that truly collective wellness – indeed, health equity – may offer.

Notes

¹ Global Wellness Institute, Miami, Florida. <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/what-is-wellness/what-is-the-wellness-economy/#>. Accessed June 20, 2024.

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